

Rep. Baird Votes NO on ANWR Drilling Bill (May 25, 2006)

Washington, D.C. - Congressman Brian Baird today released the following statement after voting against the partisan Iraq War Resolution that passed the House:

Somewhere in Iraq, a national guardsman is lacing his boots to go out on yet another night patrol. Somewhere in Afghanistan, a Taliban fighter is slipping back across the border to attack NATO forces. At Walter Reed hospital, patients are being fitted with artificial legs and arms and are learning to perform the most basic bodily functions and activities of daily living without their limbs. In more than 2,500 homes across this nation families are mourning the loss of loved ones and trying to find ways to go on.

Meanwhile, in Washington, D.C. political consultants and party leaders are distributing talking points about how to turn a supposed debate on Iraq policy into political advantage in the upcoming elections. There is something profoundly distasteful, even repulsive about this.

People are dying - our soldiers, Iraqi civilians, soldiers from other nations, civilian contractors, relief workers, and more journalists than in any prior war. Two thousand five hundred is not just a number as the President's spokesman said this week. Those numbers are people's sons and daughters, mothers, fathers, friends. Those numbers are lifetimes of dreams, hopes, and potential snuffed out. And the same is true of the numbers of Iraqi civilians killed, which is now well into the tens of thousands.

This is not the stuff to take political advantage of on any side of this debate. Whether one supports this policy or opposes it, these losses are tragedies. No amount of talking points or sound bites can replace them or fill the voids for those left behind.

Today we debated a resolution proclaiming the national commitment to democracy in Iraq, and yet ironically that debate was governed by a rule allowing no amendments or alternative proposals. Such is the state of democracy within our own borders as we presume to bring it to the rest of the world. Leaders in Congress pretend through words that they have the courage to defend democracy abroad, but they lack the courage and faith in democracy right here at home to truly allow for free and open debate in the United States Congress.

In preparation for this debate, the Majority leadership distributed a Confidential Message Memo making clear the Majority Leader's intentions to seize upon this political opportunity. In that memo, the Majority accuses the Democratic Party of sheepishly dismissing the challenges that America faces in a post-9/11 world.

Such statements are shameful and reprehensible and simply cannot go unchallenged. Clearly, this resolution - this debate - is not really about supporting our troops and the Iraqi government, or promoting democracy worldwide. It is about politics at its very worst. It represents so much of what is wrong with how Congress has dealt with this matter from the very outset right on through today.

Let us be clear about the facts. First, with the exception of only one individual, every member of Congress - Democrats and Republicans alike - voted to authorize force against the terrorists and the Afghanistan bases where the 9/11 attackers trained. Democrats did not, as the Majority Leader's memo claims, waiver endlessly about the use of force to protect American ideals. Far from it. Democrats voted boldly and decisively to authorize force in Afghanistan and we have never wavered - not for a moment - from that mission. When it came to dealing with the true source of the terrorists, with the real threats, there was no sheepish dismissal, there was unity, resolve, and purpose and there was true bipartisanship devoid of political opportunism.

Since the beginning of the Iraq conflict, Democrats - including those who opposed the war from the outset - have steadfastly stood with our troops on the ground and with their families back home. Democrats voted to increase and expedite body armor and up-armored vehicles; Democrats voted to provide increased pay to our soldiers; Democrats led efforts to provide increased VA services to returning troops; Democrats opposed Administration cuts to military housing and education programs; Democrats supported expanded health care coverage for guard and reserve forces; Democrats supported expanded GI bill benefits for combat troops. By comparison, when the Republican chair of the Veterans Affairs committee called for increased funding for vets, he was removed from his chairmanship.

Had we kept our focus on the true source of the terrorists, had we maintained our unity, had we put the boots on the ground and money into rebuilding Afghanistan, we would have succeeded in stopping the terrorists, helped construct a model society, and perhaps even apprehended Bin Laden himself. We might also have emerged a stronger, more united, and safer nation ourselves.

Instead, we lost focus. Based on false threats about weapons and terrorist links that did not exist, and with foolish, naive and irresponsible promises about minimum costs in troops and money, the Administration led the nation away from its mission in Afghanistan and into Iraq. The results have been vastly different than what the Administration and the leadership in Congress predicted and promised. No amount of symbolic debate and no talking points or message memos now can change those facts and the American people know it.

Before the war in Iraq began I offered this caution:

As the President stands poised to launch this nation on an irreversible course, neither he nor Secretaries Powell or Rumsfeld have clearly made public or presented to the Congress any estimates of the levels of American or Iraqi casualties. Neither have they described in any detail what the long term plans would be for Iraq, assuming the war proceeds as swiftly and efficiently as they suggest it will. Nor have they budgeted for the costs of the war or a subsequent occupation in any of their budget figures. The only thing we do know about war is that once it starts, anything can happen and the long term commitment of American troops and dollars will be enormous . . .

There are also serious and legitimate concerns about the destabilizing effects that could arise if heavy civilian casualties occur in Iraq or the ongoing religious tensions in the region flare as a result of an attack. (February, 2003)

Now, beyond the 2,500 killed in Iraq, beyond the more than 16,000 severely wounded, beyond the hundreds of

billions of dollars in costs, we have also profoundly damaged our international reputation and support. Nations, including one time adversaries that stood steadfastly with us in Afghanistan, have not supported our actions in Iraq. They have questioned our motives and, as revelations have shown the flaws and distortion in pre-war information, they have questioned the reliability and honesty of the Administration. The admiration and esteem in which we were once held has transformed into doubt, dismay, and even disdain.

Many senior U.S. military officials have questioned the conduct and execution of the war. These include General Anthony Zinni, former commander of US Central Command, Major General Paul Eaton, who helped run the Iraqi military training program, and Lieutenant General Greg Newbold, former operations director for the Joint Chiefs of Staff. These generals, and others like them, recognize the need for a serious discussion about the direction of the war and not further platitudes about staying the course.

Today's resolution calls for a commitment to fighting terrorism, yet most of the security recommendations of the bipartisan 9/11 commission have still not been implemented right here at home, leaving our nation vulnerable on countless fronts - from port security to the tracking of visas.

Without question, the greatest terrorist threat we currently face is a rogue nuclear weapon. Yet, the Administration and Republican Congress have sharply reduced funding for programs proven to be effective and successful at securing and eliminating nuclear warheads and fissionable material.

Most of those who spoke out today in favor of this resolution and touted their commitment to security and fighting terror did not even take the time to read the intelligence bill before voting on it. How, in a post 9/11 world, can members say they care about security yet not even read the bill that deals with our intelligence and security agencies?

What's more, while the authors and supporters of this resolution talk about their commitment to the conflict, they have never - not once - taken that commitment seriously enough to fully include the costs of the war in their budgets or honestly tell the American people how we are going to pay for this. Instead, they have simply passed even greater debt onto our children, asking them to pay for a conflict they did not choose or have a say in.

Furthermore, while Iraq did not have weapons of mass destruction, Iran is clearly working to obtain them now. Unfortunately, by putting so many soldiers on the ground in harms way of Iranian missiles and military, and by alienating so many allies in the Middle East and around the world, the Administration has tied its own hands and severely limited its options for dealing with Iran.

So much of what is said in Congress these days about the war on terror is wasted air - mere political rhetoric that means nothing. That is the case with this resolution. It is insincere in its intent and the rules of its debate were cowardly and hypocritical. The American people, the Iraqi people, and the world deserve better from this Congress.

Where do we go from here? Many have called for a fixed timetable for withdrawal. I have not supported this because I do not want to put our troops or commanders on the ground in the position of making unwise or hasty strategic decisions that might jeopardize their safety or the safety of Iraqi civilians. This is still my position. At the same time,

however, I cannot support those who would leave an open end to our involvement as this resolution would do.

¶½In the wake of elections in Iraq and the formation of a new government, we must enter into serious negotiations about a pace for withdrawal of U.S. troops as Iraqi military and security forces become more able to fill that role. For all the mistakes and losses of this conflict, there has been some progress in establishing a new government, restoring order, and training up Iraqi forces to police their own nation. We need to accelerate that process, enlist support of friendly nations in the region, including Jordan and Egypt, and continue to encourage other nations to help share in this burden. We must also speed the restoration of critical infrastructure while training and employing Iraqis - not foreign contractors - to do the work.

¶½Beyond Iraq, if we truly want to protect our nation from terrorism, we must renew our focus on Afghanistan and not let that nation be lost yet again to the Taliban and Al Qaeda. Finally, the single most important thing we can do to reduce the threat of terror and promote stability in the region is facilitate a true, lasting, and just resolution to the Palestinian ¶½Israeli conflict.

¶½This war in Iraq and the struggle against terror are as serious as anything can be and I am absolutely committed to supporting our troops and protecting the security of this nation and its people. Unfortunately, the resolution before us today is not about where we ¶½stand as a nation¶½ it is about politicians grandstanding before an election. It is meant intentionally to divide rather than unite, and it is being debated under rules that are anti-democratic. It does nothing of substance to hasten the end of this conflict or protect our nation from terrorists. For these reasons, I voted no.¶½

Congressman Baird opposed the decision to go to war in Iraq and voted against giving President Bush the authorization to use military force. He was among a core group of Democrats who led the opposition to the war and championed a more sensible alternative.

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